

Building for a future

Carpentry program prepares inmates for new lives

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Unlike scenes from movies, these men won't leave prison with just bus fare and a cheap suit.

As soon as they step outside the walls, these 24 inmates from Folsom State Prison and neighboring California State Prison, Sacramento, will start over with a new job, a new set of tools and a new lease on life.

Last month, the pre-apprenticeship carpentry program at Folsom State Prison graduated another class of inmates who'd spent the last six months learning carpentry, framing and concrete pouring, among other skills, alongside members of a Sacramento carpenters union.

Plucked from Folsom State Prison and neighboring California State Prison, Sacramento, the inmates are given a \$400 tool set upon their release and job-placement through local unions or government agencies throughout the state, through the program run by the Prison Industry Authority, a division of the California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation.

As Chuck Pattillo, general manager of the authority, put it to the graduating class, "the goal of the program is that I never want to see any of you gentlemen again."

In a separate interview, Pattillo said the program, managed by the Prison Industry Authority, graduates about 100 inmates per year. The prisoners work side by side with six members of a local carpenters union, as well as five other staff members, he said.

The minimum-security inmates also concurrently work on passing the General Educational Development (GED) test, Pattillo said. About 300 to 400 prisoners from around the state are on the waiting list for Folsom's program, which has been in operation for nearly a year.

According to the latest figures, there are 172,000 inmates incarcerated in California prisons.

Dale Gamble, a carpenter for 32 years and a member of the Sacramento Carpenters Local 46, has been teaching the inmates for the last two months. The carpenters' participation is under the guidance of the Northern California Regional Council of Carpenters.

"It's rewarding to me," he said. "These guys want to get out and stay out. They want to make a good life for themselves and never come back."

He said the attitudes of the inmates are mostly good and that he doesn't fear for his safety while working inside the prison walls.

Violet Jones-Wingfield of San Leandro was at the ceremony to see her son Charles Callum, an inmate at California State Prison, Sacramento, graduate.

"I see his mind going in a good direction," she said, adding her son would be finishing his year-long sentence in May.

Callum is her only son, she said, and seeing him behind bars was "really difficult."

But since the program, she said she's seen a change in her boy.

"The experience (in prison) turned out to be positive," she said. "I've talked to him, and he has changed."

Jesse Gonzalez of Gilroy, who's finishing up a 12-year sentence for drug charges, also said the program was a blessing.

"I feel real proud," he said, holding his diploma after graduation Tuesday. "It feels like a door is opening."

Gonzalez said he's about six months away from finishing his fourth term in prison and that this time will be his last. He plans to return to Gilroy and his 8-year-old son, who was born while Gonzalez was still locked up.

"They got me a job in San Jose," he said. "I believe in myself. This is going to be the last time, now that I've got the union behind me."